



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: August 13, 2020

Agenda Item: Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area, Region 1

Action Needed: Endorsement **Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

Background: FWP is proposing acquisition of 800 acres of forest along 1.6 miles of the Flathead River near Columbia Falls to protect water quality and important fish and wildlife habitat, while providing free public recreation access. The property is highly developable and threatened by the rapidly growing city of Columbia Falls, but would be protected as a Wildlife Management Area under this proposal. The Columbia Falls Aluminum Company (CFAC), a subsidiary of Glencore, a multi-national company, has decided to dispose of this property. The property is winter range for elk, moose, and white-tailed deer. Completion of this project would safeguard vital habitat and a travel corridor for bull trout and grizzly bears, ESA-listed species found on the property. This key corridor is located at a geographic pinch point where the Flathead River flows through the very narrow Bad Rock Canyon. The project is adjacent to a stronghold of public lands and would add to a 12,000-acre network of conserved land along a 43-mile reach of the Flathead River between Columbia Falls and Flathead Lake. The property currently provides an excellent opportunity for youth and disabled hunters to harvest elk and white-tailed deer just minutes from Columbia Falls, which would also be lost if this property were developed. A trail has been constructed on the property by Gateway to Glacier Trail, Inc., a local nonprofit group granted a revocable license issued by CFAC to allow access for hikers, bikers, birdwatchers, and others. Under FWP ownership, public access could be managed to preserve wildlife presence and hunting opportunities while allowing compatible trail and property use.

CFAC has given FWP and the Flathead Land Trust, our partner on this project, a two-year window to complete this project. The USFS Forest Legacy Program, Habitat Montana, and Pittman-Robertson could all be possible funding sources for this project, along with private funding raised by the Flathead Land Trust. If the project fails, the property would most likely be quickly sold, subdivided, and developed into a high-density neighborhood that would include highly sought-after riverfront lots.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Flathead Land Trust met with the City of Columbia Falls and received enthusiastic support for this project. The proposal also has support from Sen. Jon Tester, federal agencies, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Flathead County Planning & Zoning, and many conservation groups. No formal public involvement has yet occurred. If the commission endorses moving forward with this project, FWP would conduct appropriate due diligence, analysis, and public review processes.

Alternatives and Analysis: Proposal alternatives and analysis would be developed by FWP (upon endorsement by the commission) and released in a draft EA for public review/comment opportunity.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission endorse this proposal, allowing the department to further pursue and evaluate it and to offer opportunities for public review and comment.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission endorse the proposal to negotiate acquisition of the Bad Rock Canyon property and complete associated analysis.